

Wetlands are wonderlands if you consider that:

- *Wetlands provide food and shelter to countless types of fish, birds, reptiles and mammals. Many types of endangered species, including 45 percent of animals and 26 percent of plants on the federal list of threatened or endangered species, depend on wetlands.*
- *Wetlands provide critical habitat for a majority of the commercial fish and shellfish consumed in the United States. Each year, the nation's commercial fisheries harvest is valued at more than \$10 billion, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. In the southeast, 96 percent of the commercial catch and more than 50 percent of the recreational catch consists of fish and shellfish that depend on estuary/coastal wetlands systems. Examples of wetlands-dependent fish include bluefish, flounder, sea trout, croaker and striped bass. Commercial shellfish include shrimp, oysters, clams and blue and Dungenese crabs.*
- *Wetlands are the most valuable inland marshes for waterfowl production in North America. These wetlands, known as "prairie potholes," stretch from south-central Canada to north-central United States. More than half of the continent's ducks are hatched in prairie potholes, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.*
- *Wetlands also provide valuable benefits to humans. Wetlands act as a buffer to protect shore areas from waves and storms. Wetlands store water, helping to reduce flooding. Some wetlands store water in a wet time of the year, releasing the water later into nearby aquifers or underground streams and recharging the groundwater that supplies us with drinking water. Wetlands help purify water by breaking down waste and by trapping silt or soil that settles on the bottom.*
- *Wetlands offer unique opportunities for boating, fishing, hunting and nature watching. People who hunt, fish, crab, hike, walk and boat and those who observe and photograph birds in wetlands spend nearly \$10 billion a year on their hobby.*

***For more information, contact
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The facts on

Wetlands

***We must find a
balance
between 'using
and abusing'
wetlands.
Wetlands
protection is a
shared
responsibility
among all
levels of
government,
private groups
and
landowners.***

What are wetlands?

Wetlands are areas covered with water for periods long enough to support plants that thrive in wet soils. The areas include bogs, marshes, swamps and wet meadows. Not all wetlands have standing water all year. Many wetlands may be dry during some seasons or lack noticeable plant growth during certain seasons.

Wetlands occur in every state, but they vary in size, shape and type because of different climate, soil and vegetation. All wetlands, however, are either freshwater or saltwater. About 95 percent of wetlands in the contiguous United States are freshwater.

Some states have more wetlands than others. About 1 percent of Utah is covered by wetlands, while more than 45 percent of the surface area of Alaska is wetlands.

There are about 4.5 million acres of wetlands in South Carolina, about 23.4 percent of the state's land surface. Only four states — Alaska, Florida, Louisiana and Maine — have a higher percentage of wetlands, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. South Carolina's wetlands account for about 12 percent of wetlands in the southeastern United States.



Why are wetlands important?

Wetlands are unique and are some of the most ecologically important areas on earth. They have multiple and diverse functions ranging from being valuable for wildlife habitat to improving water quality and providing flood protection.

Wetlands losses

Despite their many values, wetlands historically have been misunderstood and abused because their importance wasn't obvious. For many years, wetlands were seen as "useless swamps" and were frequently filled, drained, polluted or used for dumping grounds.

The destruction of wetlands nationwide has been dramatic. More than half of all wetlands in the 48 contiguous states have been lost since the mid-1700s. Between the mid-1950s and 1970s, 9 million acres of wetlands were lost. Some states have lost most of their original wetlands.

In the past two decades, 84 percent of wetlands losses have occurred in the southeastern United States. The losses in South Carolina do not appear to be as extensive as in other states. Officials estimate that South Carolina has lost about 27 percent of its wetlands since the mid-1700s.

Policies, outlook on wetlands are changing

The growing awareness of the importance and value of this natural resource has led to legislative protection and restoration proposals across the country. One common legislative proposal is a "no net loss" policy. That means any wetlands lost through man's activities, like filling for development, must be matched by restoration, expansion or replacement of an equal amount of wetlands.

This concept also was recommended by the National Wetlands Policy Forum, a group of public and private leaders who address major policy concerns about how the nation should manage and protect wetlands. In January 1989, former President George Bush recognized the goals of the forum and said the national goal for wetlands protection would be "no overall net loss of wetlands."

Still, national progress on improving protection for wetlands has not occurred as quickly as needed, and wetlands losses have continued. There is no comprehensive statewide program and no single state agency in South Carolina responsible for wetlands protection or regulation. Existing state programs are tied to federal programs.

South Carolina's Wetlands

** There are about 4.5 million acres of wetlands in South Carolina, about 23 percent of the state's land surface.*

** About 90 percent of the state's wetlands are freshwater. The remainder are saltwater and brackish water marsh.*

** Freshwater wetlands are lands flooded or saturated by freshwater from rain, surface runoff, flooding or groundwater discharge. In contrast, coastal and estuarine wetlands are flooded or saturated by tidal flooding of salt or brackish water.*

** Freshwater wetlands occur throughout South Carolina, but are most abundant in the central and lower areas of the state.*

** Freshwater marshes are most prevalent along the lower portions of the Waccamaw, Pee Dee, Santee, Cooper, Edisto and Savannah rivers.*

** Forested wetlands, primarily cypress-tupelo swamps and bottomland hardwood forest, occur in abundance along the Waccamaw, Pee Dee, Little Pee Dee, Lynches, Black, Santee, Wateree, Congaree, Edisto, Salkehatchie and Savannah rivers.*

** Isolated wetlands are found throughout the state, but are most numerous in the central and lower areas of South Carolina. They include Carolina bays, pocosins, potholes, mountain bogs and sinkholes.*

Source: Report of the Governor's Freshwater Wetlands Forum